

“PIDGIN” ENGLISH.

BY N. B. DENNYS PH. D.

Read at a Meeting of the Society held on the 9th Dec. 1878.

Most visitors to the Far East have heard of Pidgin English, though its use is principally confined to Hongkong and the “Treaty” or open ports of China. How and when it took its origin is an unsolved mystery. The oldest living foreign resident in China recollects it as the standard means of communication, not merely between foreign masters and their domestic servants, but between the once fabulously rich members of the *Cougsee* or “Thirteen Hongs,” who, up to 1859, were alone permitted to transact business at Canton with “outside barbarians.” But we fail to find any authentic record as to when it first assumed the dignity of a language or when proficiency in its phraseology was an object of ambition to dapper young Chinese clerks to enable them to fill the posts of interpreters and squeeze-collectors. It appears to have been in common use when Dr. Morrison was achieving the herculean task of compiling the first Anglo-Chinese dictionary, some sixty or more years ago, and was probably current shortly after the East India Company’s factory was first established at the City of Rams. I propose to occupy a few minutes of your time in briefly describing this latest addition to the philological family, and, it may be, to vindicate its claims to passing attention as illustrating under our own eyes a process which many tongues now ranking as important must have undergone in their earlier stages. There is a strong flavour of “Pidgin” in a good deal of the Law Latin and French of the 11th and 12th centuries. Pidgin English therefore, uncouth as it is, aids us in recalling how linguistic changes were brought about in our own and kindred languages.

Speculation, however, as I have said, is woefully adrift in tracing its origin, and even its name has puzzled the brains of clever etymologists. The most popular and probably the most correct derivation is from the word “business” which

on the lips of a Chinaman utterly ignorant of English *does* sound something like "pidgin." But I must confess that this seems to me a rather far fetched origin though I cannot suggest anything better: nor, so far as I am aware, can any one else.

As regards the formation of this queer dialect we find less difficulty in arriving at a conclusion.

Of the natural tendency of language to assimilate words from sources foreign to its own origin we have numerous examples in everyday life. Hindostanee words have become a part and parcel of the English spoken in Great Britain, while numerous Spanish expressions are current in the United States. Spanish itself, again, has in Uruguay and Paraguay admitted a large admixture of Guarani, and the conservative Chinese have with equal facility adopted many words from Manchu and Mongolian. In all these cases the intruding vocables have at first passed as "slang" until custom has stamped them with the mint-mark of respectability. No visible effect is produced upon the languages in question by the presence of these strangers. Yet dialects are to be found which, beginning under similar circumstances, have so lost their original identity in the process as to have become veritable philological "bastards." Such are the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean, and the *gitano* or gypsey language of that vast tribe, of Hindoo origin, which still exists in every European country, its members, like Ishmael of old, having "their hand against every man, and every man's hand against them." The most recent of these bastard dialects, and necessarily less perfect in its individuality than those above-mentioned, is the Pidgin English under notice, which at the present day is spoken by some hundreds of thousands of Chinese upon the seaboard of their empire, and even threatens to extend to the coasts of Japan.

There was also, singularly enough, a native Chinese dialect in process of formation, which was to the colloquial of the district in which it existed what "pidgin" is to pure English. One effect of the Taiping rebellion, which caused an influx of natives from the districts of Central China to Shanghai, was to cause the formation of a fused dialect, consisting of words indifferently taken from those spoken at Shanghai, Canton, and Nanking. No great growth of this speech has been noticeable since the rebellion was crushed; but it bade fair at one time to contribute another to the already numerous varieties spoken in different parts of the empire.

It is not impossible that events will some day bring about this result, in which case it will probably attract considerable attention on the part of sinologues, as the tonal rules hitherto in force will be subjected to new and curious violations.

Still, with all this granted, none of the dialects or languages I have mentioned are precisely analogous to "pidgin English" which, broadly speaking, chiefly consists of the words of one language more or less mutilated, put together according to the idiom of another. Moreover there is, I fancy, no record of any dialect however uncouth having sprung up in so mushroom-like yet complete a manner. A member of our Council who very kindly took the trouble to send me some notes for this paper writes: "A great difficulty presents itself to my mind at once. How could a system of speech have got itself established so soon as pidgin English must have done, under the common view of its origin? Internal evidence appears to me to point to another source than the first English factory at Canton and a necessity not explained by the difficulties found by English in speaking Chinese or by Chinese in speaking English;" and he points out that there is no pidgin Portuguese at Macao where the same difficulties should have led to the same results. I do not however quite agree with him. I should be inclined to say that the immense difficulty experienced by average Europeans in becoming fluent in Chinese is quite sufficient to account for any alternative being gladly adopted: while as regards Portuguese, though that spoken at Macao is not exactly "Pidgin" it is much deteriorated in Chinese mouths; moreover it is far easier for a Chinaman to learn than English, which is I imagine the most difficult of all European languages for the Chinese to master.

Let us turn to the principal rules which govern "pidgin English," and if possible, arrive at some conclusion as to its probable future. Although only dating back to the early days of the East India Company, a sufficient time has elapsed since its origin to fix its formation within regular limits. Take, for instance, to begin with, the pronoun. This occurs only in the forms *my*, *he*, and *you*, which do duty both as personals and possessives "he" doing duty for "she" and it. "We" and "they" are rendered by *thisee man*, *that man*, the context implying when they are used in a personal rather than a demonstrative sense. The sentence "I saw him" thus becomes "my have see he;" while "we went out" would be rendered "Allo thisee man go out." There is not here any analogy between the Chinese forms (resem-

bling our own) and the rude substitutes adopted. All native dialects have I, he, we, you, and they, the possessives (in Mandarin) being regularly formed by the addition of *ti*, of: thus, *wo*, I; *wo ti*, mine. The article and conjunction are entirely dispensed with in "pidgin" as they are colloquially in Chinese, the word "together" being used as a copulative only in extreme cases. Verbs are in "pidgin English" conjugated by the use of such words as *hab*, *by me-by* &c. Thus "I saw him" becomes "my hab looksee he"; "I shall get it" is "my by'me-by catchee he." The infinitives of most words are made to end in *ee*: *likee*, *wantsee*, *walkee*. The word *belong* or *b'long* also does duty as an auxiliary "I am a Chinaman" being "my b'long Chinese." The subjunctive also is formed by adding this word *belong*: "you should go" being expressed as "you b'long go." "If I go" is "sposee my go;" and beyond this there are no means of expressing the other tenses except by clumsy combinations. "If I had gone" is "sposee my have go." *B'long*, of course, stands for "it belongs to your business to."

The comparison of adjectives is effected by prefixing the words "more" and "too muchee," though the ordinary comparative form is often used in conjunction with the first-named: thus, good, more better (pronounced *bettah*), too muchee good; largee (also pronounced *lahgee*), more largee, too muchee big. The Chinese form is simple enough: "I am better than he is" being "I, than he, good;" or, in the superlative, "that is the best," "that, than all, exceeding good." Pidgin English uses our own handy "yes" and "no" in place of the awkward "it is," "it is not," of Chinese. These examples show that, as regards grammatical structure, "pidgin" is in the main an imperfect adaptation of our own rules. But the general construction of sentences is essentially Chinese. "Go to the post-office and bring me a letter" would be rendered just as it would be translated in a native dialect: "You savee that post-officee; go looksee have got one chit b'long my; sposee have got you makee bling." The absence of a relative form necessitates the cutting up of all long phrases into short sentences both in Chinese and pidgin English.

Such being, in short, some of the most important grammatical peculiarities of this dialect, let us turn to its pronunciation. There are certain sounds which the Chinaman has from custom an inherent difficulty in pronouncing. Thus, he cannot sound the final *ge* of "large" except as a separate syllable, so he adds an *e* and makes it *largee*. A similar dis-

ability exists to pronounce under certain circumstances, dependent on the initial sound following them, words ending in *f*, *t*, *k*, *th*, *m*, *n*, *s*, and *v*, which in like manner have *ee* or *o* added to them; *t* and *k* frequently take *see*, "want" becoming "wantsee." There is no apparent reason for this latter peculiarity, unless it may be referred to habit, arising from the constant recurrence of the *ts* sound in all Chinese dialects. Custom gives the final *ee* to many words ending in *b* and *l*, but they present no difficulty to the native speaker as pure finals. The letter *r* is absolutely unpronounceable either as initial or medial to the Southern Chinaman, and is avoided as a final when possible—in striking contradistinction to the mandarin-speaking portion of the empire. In Peking, almost every word is capable of taking a final *r* sound by adding to or eliding its primitive terminal; thus, *jen* becomes *jenh*; *m̄*, *ārh*, etc. When pronounced in the south the *r* closely resembles the Hindoo letter *r*, which is between an *r* and a *d*.

The results of these rules—if they can be so called—are somewhat odd, the more so as, in addition to disguising the words, the native compilers of pidgin vocabularies often make up the quaintest combinations to express very simple words. As specimens of merely adulterated English I may mention *allo* for all, *chilo* for child, *facey* for face or character, *Ink-e-lee* for English, *kumpat-o* for Compradore, and so on. But one becomes puzzled at such renderings at *pūt-lūt-ta* for brother *ha-ssū-man* for husband or *sha-man* for servant. Of compound words I may quote *bull-chilo* and *cow-chilo* for boy and girl; *allo piopi* for quite right *Joss pidgin man* or *Heaven pidgin man* for missionary, and *looksee pidgin* for ostentation or hypocrisy; while anybody reputed to be cracked is described as one who *hab got water top side!*

It will be readily understood that, thus "transmogrified," English as spoken by natives at the China ports becomes a jargon, rescued only from contempt by the fixed rules under which it is constructed, and the illustration it affords of Chinese idioms. Many words in common use are of Portuguese or Malay origin, while a certain number of pure Chinese phrases add to its polyglot character. Some words, again, are neither English, Chinese, nor anything else but "pidgin," and their derivation cannot be ascertained. Such are *maskee*, which signifies "never mind," *chin-chin*, for "how do you do," or "good bye," "to compliment," etc. This latter phrase is not, as commonly supposed, Chinese. There is a phrase, *Tsing Tsing*, meaning "if you pleases;"

but it is never used in the sense of the modern *Chin-Chin*, and the natives believe the latter to be pure English. One of the most curious "pidgin" words is an excrescence pronounced *ga-lah*. It has no signification, and is simply added to a word or sentence to round it off. A Chinaman will thus say, "my wantsee go topside *ga-lah*" for "I shall be going upstairs" or "up town." The origin of this queer word is found in Chinese colloquial. Each dialect has certain "empty sounds," as the syllables are appropriately named, which are affixed to the ends of sentences to satisfy certain laws of rhythm, and the commonest of these is *ko-lo* or *ko-la*, which has easily changed into *ga-lah*. I must not omit to mention a word which is of constant use and without which a Chinaman quite breaks down in the simplest phrases—the word *piecey*. This represents what is termed the "classifier" which in Chinese colloquial precedes most substantives and to which a close analogy is shewn by such words as *orang*, *buah*, *biji* &c. in Malay. As Chinese however possesses some 75 of these useful words there is no need to look beyond it for the derivation of their pidgin equivalent.

Although pidgin English seems, when first heard by an unaccustomed stranger, to be as difficult as a veritable foreign language, its inverted construction and curious mispronunciation are very easily acquired, and it therefore continues in extensive use. A colloquy committed to writing looks curious. Suppose, for instance, a foreigner to have called about some business on a native merchant:

Chinaman. Ai yah! chin-chin; how you do?

Foreigner. Chin-chin; any piecee news have got?

Ch. No got news; thisee day b'long too muchee hot?

For. Yes; too muchee hot; you pidgin numba one?

Ch. Pidgin no b'long good jus' now; you got any pidgin for my?

For. My got littee smallo piecee; my wantsee buytee one lole (roll) sillik (silk.)

Ch. Ah! my got plenty. What fashion coloh you wantsee? Allo fashion have got. That Gurnoah missistee (Governor's wife) any time come thisee shop makee buytee (always deals at this shop); etc., etc.

It does not appear that pidgin English will die out. Numbers of Chinese, indeed, thanks to emigration to the United States, and the increased facilities available in the British

Government schools at Hongkong, now learn to talk English with fluency and correctness; and the number of foreigners who acquire one or other of the Chinese dialects is increasing, the latest estimate, counting all nationalities, being somewhat over five hundred. But there is always a large fluctuating population of foreign soldiers, sailors, and visitors, to whom the acquisition of Chinese would involve a toil quite disproportioned to its use. To these a means of communication with the natives, based on a European vocabulary, is too serviceable to be dispensed with, and for them pidgin English will hold its ground. So far from dying out, it seems rather probable that in the course of years it will take rank as a dialect beside the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean Sea. Those who are curious to see how pidgin English looks when printed may be referred to Mr. Leland's little book of Pidgin English Sing-Song in the Raffles Library. Although some of its phrases are rather far fetched it will give any one a tolerably fair idea of this singular dialect.